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ABSTRACT

Although intrusive factors--such as the economy--have limited recent strides toward improving rural education, there are components of excellence within the realm of local determination that are appropriate to conditions, circumstances, and aspirations surrounding the schooling process in rural areas. The educational reform movement in most states has resulted in increased requirements that must be considered by rural educators/boards/citizens. While these mandates set parameters, local communities can determine goals and practices for the excellence components of content, standards and expectations, time, teaching and the teacher, and reinforcement of cultural mores. Rural communities can decide to meet or exceed minimum standards, with provision made to meet the needs of all children. Communities should take adequate time to identify issues, propose options, develop curriculum, and meet needs of students requiring instructional diversity. Teachers should not only be involved in the content process but should be accepted as members of the communities that recruit them. The additional preparation required of rural teachers should be supported by in-service and staff development, evaluation, career ladders, and incentive pay. Cultural mores can be reinforced by integrating character development into the school environment. These components of rural school excellence do not exhaust the list of items that could be explored. (BRR)

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A PAPER

COMPONENTS OF RURAL SCHOOL EXCELLENCE

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Former Commissioner of Education
Nebraska

July, 1985

National Rural Education Forum

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AN ABSTRACT
COMPONENTS OF RURAL SCHOOL EXCELLENCE

Dr. Anne Campbell
Former Commissioner of Education, Nebraska

INTRODUCTION

A review of the progress and challenges facing educators and other citizens in rural areas arising from legislation, rules and regulations.

REQUISITES

Mandates, though unique to each state, address common topics perceived to pursue excellence in schools.

COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE

Within the parameters set by minimum standards in rules and regulations are components for excellence within the realm of local determination. Some of those components are:

Content. Local communities in rural areas determine the goals and objectives of the curricular and extracurricular program. Standards and Expectations. A rural community can decide to meet minimum standards or to exceed them. Provision for meeting the needs of all children, no exceptions, is made. Time. Time along with effort is committed to planning and organizing a program to pursue excellence by the entire community. Teachers and administrators are afforded time to develop curricular materials and prepare for learning experiences. Students who need instructional diversity are attended to. Teaching and the Teacher. Recruitment, preparation, in-service and staff development, evaluation, career ladders and incentive pay, and retention are among elements that have a significant impact on learning. Teachers are accepted as members of the community. Reinforcement of Cultural Mores. Integration of character development within the environment of the school includes honesty, respect, loyalty, etc. School climate enhances learning.

THE FUTURE

Components of rural school excellence are numerous, tangible and intangible, and the many components do not offer a guarantee of excellence. It is the pursuit of excellence in the schooling process to which rural schools aspire. Learning from successes rather than acknowledging failures is the incentive in that pursuit. The uniqueness of rural areas should be treated in a special way. Promoting excellence in rural schools is achievable.

COMPONENTS OF RURAL SCHOOL EXCELLENCE

INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, it was said, "Education in rural schools is alive, working to provide quality education through different organizational configurations, and experiencing many changes as it strives for excellence to meet the needs of all children living in rural areas."

In the interim considerable strides have been made through a variety of efforts within and among schools and districts. However, within the last eighteen months to two years other factors have intruded that have made it difficult or perhaps, more challenging, to continue even at a steady rate.

One factor, of course, is the acknowledgement that rural schools, assuming there is an agreed upon definition, are so different from each other that a "rural solution" appears impossible to attain. The differences seem to expand rather than decrease as mobility along with other factors bear down upon rural America.

A second is the present state of the economy in rural areas.

A third is demography, while showing an influx of people in some rural areas, the trend now appears to be reversing itself as the number of farms and jobs in rural areas decrease. Many of those moving to rural expanses also have brought diverse philosophies and beliefs about schooling.

A fourth, and perhaps the most pervasive, influence has been the reform movement based upon guidelines and/or prescriptions that have been directed or interpreted by governor's, state legislators, and state departments of education.

All of the legislation, rules and regulations have been with the best intentions to contribute to excellence in education for the young people of this nation. However, consequences of the above actions fall indiscriminately upon school districts. Ultimate effects when joined with funding at state levels indicates the tendency toward state control of education and a lessened role for local determination.

Likewise, some mandates make it difficult for rural schools to respond, and "necessarily small" schools are particularly affected because of their "geographic isolation and size-limited resources."[1]

Unquestionably, consolidation can produce, under certain situations, significant long-range benefits for some small districts and consolidation is long overdue. For others, it is simply not practical for the student or the community.

At the same time components for excellence in these schools are both desirable and supported to a great degree by participants in a recent survey.[2]

Therefore, time and effort must be given to finding solutions to the inherent problems not by confrontations or by assessing blame for them. Rural and small town youth and adults need, just as their urban and suburban counterparts, the knowledge and skills to enter and remain competitive in an increasingly complex and technological society.[3]

REQUISITES

Nearly every state has approached the reform movement to bring about improvement in schooling at the secondary level in a manner unique to the perceived needs of that state. Generally, task forces having rural representation have been involved in developing rules and regulations for secondary education

within which every school district will operate. The rules and regulations will usually include the number of units in academic and complementary courses, encompassing foreign language proficiency (New York), physical education, vocational education, and the arts; graduation requirements; learner outcomes for grade advancement and graduation through testing; differentiated diplomas, New York's Regents Diploma; higher certification standards and testing of teachers. The length of the school day, the school year, and even the length of the periods within a day have been set in legislation and in regulation in some cases.

Add the mandatory requirement of a passing grade in every course taken by a student before being eligible to participate in extracurricular activities (Texas), and the abundance of factors to be taken into consideration as rural boards of education, educators, and citizens, especially, plan their programs and procedures for excellence in education not only for the short-term but for the long-term future.

COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE

What do all of the mandates have to do with excellence and quality? They set parameters, but there are important components to heed within the realm of local determination that are appropriate to conditions, circumstances, and aspirations surrounding the schooling process in rural areas.

A recent publication of the National School Public Relations Association, GOOD SCHOOLS: WHAT MAKES THEM WORK, stated that "perhaps the best way to accomplish rural school improvement is to enhance the inherent strengths of rural schools rather than attempt to force them to fit outside structures."[4]

In adhering to Paul Nactigal's treatise that school issues are community issues in rural areas and characteristics of effective rural schools are the same as

effective schools anywhere, except that educational innovations in rural areas must have an extremely high level of community support,[5] the following components of rural school excellence are proposed:

Content is more than courses offered, it is the substance to be taught in them. The information explosion makes it difficult to decide course content. Local boards, administrators, teachers, parents and the community must reach concensus insofar as possible on what the instructional goals for their students will be in light of the state and federal guidelines.

On the basis of the district's goals and expectations content is derived. It is important that teachers be involved in the process of developing content to be included in the curriculum. It is they who will teach, manage and coach in the learning activities - the involvement takes time, and we all should know that the best time for development of curriculum is not after a full day of teaching!

Textbooks should be chosen on the basis of the goals and objectives evolved at the community level. Testing practices can then be coordinated with what is being taught.

Textbooks are definitely related to content, and though they are in the process of being upgraded, the textbooks that any district may adopt will be influenced by the decisions made by the large textbook adoption states, mainly Texas. This state-of-the-art makes it doubly important that supplementary materials that have both a state and community emphasis be developed.

Teachers are the intermediaries in curriculum and supplementary material development which takes that extra time, and if teachers "own" the content, they have greater interest and do perform better in the classroom.

Another consideration in planning for content is for an articulated curriculum. A scope and sequence that flows smoothly through the elementary grades to middle school/junior high or K-8 to high school is an area that too few school systems or staffs have really studied.

Standards and Expectations were common parts in reports published over the past several years, i.e. " . . . making sure to give to all children, all with no exceptions, the same quality of education."[6] The implication being that there are attainable in the schooling process "rigorous and measurable standards and high expectations for academic performance and student conduct."[7]

Local communities in rural areas will determine the extent to which they wish to attend to minimum standards and expectations as contained in rules and regulations or exceed them as many rural schools have done.

It should be an agreed upon belief "that everyone can learn, and that everyone is born with an urge to learn which can be nurtured."[8] Rural communities have the expertise to bring about quality for all students. If there is the will, ways to do so will be found.

Time is another component of excellence as alluded to previously. Time at some point in the process on the part of the community, residents of small towns and surrounding areas, as well as the groups most closely associated with the school(s), boards of education, educators, and parents will be called for. Careful organization, assignment of responsibility, and an inventory of current resources are necessary in order that issues are identified, options proposed, concensus reached, costs ascertained and time-frame decided. Every segment requires judicious planning and time to resolve differences.

Technical assistance is available. State departments of education, the private sector and regional units are prepared to help and support such efforts.

Also, suggested in an earlier observation, serious attention must be given to providing adequate time for teachers and administrators to develop the curriculum and supplementary materials necessary to implement the goals and objectives to meet agreed upon expectations.

Extended contracts for teachers such as given to principals should be considered. In addition, in-service or staff development for all teachers effected will need to be planned for.

Time has another aspect, that is, its wise use-organization of the school day in light of pre-determined instructional goals and objectives for all students to accomplish. There may be necessity for some students, slow learners, the gifted, and others who need more instructional diversity than can be accommodated under present structure relating to the school day and school year.

If the utopia of no interruptions, no discipline problems, no emergencies, no extra paperwork, ad infinitum, were possible, the current organizational arrangement might remain the same or even be shortened. However, the restrictions of the 'Carnegie Unit,' legislated mandates, tradition, and administrative expedience do hinder more creative contemplation of ways to use time, perhaps more productively.[9]

Fundamental components of excellence in schools are <u>teaching</u> and the <u>teacher</u>. These two extend beyond the requisites of time. Recruitment, preparation, in-service and staff development, evaluation, career ladders and incentive pay, and retention among others, have a significant impact on the

quality of learning. Not in the same grouping but a critical factor, particularly in rural schools and rural areas, is the acceptance of a teacher (an outsider) as a part of the community.

Recruitment of prospective teachers is as much of a responsibility of rural communities (all communities, for that matter) as it is of the education profession itself. Recognition of the importance of teaching, the respect for teachers, and the rewards of teaching both for compensation and for satisfaction. Recruitment on the part of all citizens is a commitment to the fulfillment of an educated citizenry regardless of site.

There is little question that preparing teachers for rural schools requires added consideration in learning about various rural cultures, how they organize, how one identifies their societal divisions, i.e., power structures, familial relationships, etc. Before a teacher-candidate does his/her student-teaching or as a part of an observation experience in rural settings, these abilities for sensitivity and understanding should be a part of the training, and again be reinforced before recommendation for a teaching certificate is given.

Most would agree the training program for teachers in rural areas should require at least two academic disciplines for a secondary school placement, and a major or two minors in the disciplines for an elementary appointment. It is recognized that teachers in rural schools often have more than one subject to teach which means several preparations. In order to remain resourceful and knowledgeable in-service and staff development, opportunities for teachers must be provided. Such opportunities can be offered through a number of means, two-way TV, cable, correspondence, regional in-service, etc. At least a portion of the cost should be budgeted locally.

Evaluation by professionally trained educators has been accepted in every school. Professional associations view evaluation as an obligation of people in the profession. In fact, evaluation is seen as a way to improve teaching and administration because it provides for intervention strategies to ameliorate weaknesses, relieve burnout, and refine strengths. Arrangements for additional assistance in evaluation programs should be designed.

Incentives for recognition of quality teaching is in its infant stages. However, development of a career-ladder concept and the criteria for awarding compensation for the steps are spreading among the states. Teachers must be involved in establishing the criteria and should have options in applying for the various steps. Research has shown rural school teachers and administrators are poorly rewarded (paid) for their work. Recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators are major problems in rural America, some innovative ways must be pursued to rectify the situation.

As stated earlier in this component, acceptance of a teacher by the community is a critical factor in retaining an excellent teacher. Oftentimes teachers are called upon to teach Sunday School, participate in clubs and other activities, when their free time is limited and the need for diversion is paramount. Yet they need to make friends with community members so there is a social life, one of relaxation, of recreation, of feeling at home. Teachers are 'people', too. Confinement to one's own group (teachers) is often stifling and counterproductive.

An underlying component of excellence in rural schools in the Reinforcement of Cultural Mores as perceived by the particular community. Many states encourage the integration of character development within the environment of the school, and rural society, generally, supports the inclusion of

such values as honesty, tact, courage, obedience, persistence, loyalty, generosity, respect, and the like. Attention to character development, of course, is not the sole imperative of the school for the school is the reflection of the community and the "extra-school" world which surrounds it. The appearance of the concern for discipline in the schools presages further study in a holistic "for-character approach."[10] School climate enhances learning.

THE FUTURE

The aforementioned components of rural school excellence, even excellence in any school, in no way exhaust the list of items that could be explored. Likewise, these components offer no guarantee that 'excellence' will be achieved depending upon expectations and measurement devices deemed to be the key for successful accomplishment.

The cited components are, however, conducive to the promotion of excellence. Daniel L. Duke, Director of Educational Administration, Lewis & Clark College, in his article, "What Is the Nature of Educational Excellence And Should We Try to Measure It?" (Phi Delta KAPPAN, June, 1985, p. 673) asks the question, "Do we want students whose goal is to pass tests or students whose goal is to apply knowledge?"

Again, most people would value the latter with its reasoning, inquiry and application of common sense. Survival in many rural areas is dependent upon these features of 'excellence.' Working collaboratively, those interested in improving quality in rural schools must proceed to authenticate its reality.

Rural schools in numerous instances have promoted the pursuit of excellence, and as William Raspberry quoted in his article, "Why Not Study the

Successes," wrote, "It's a mystery why we spend so much time analyzing our failures and so little time trying to learn from our successes."

As New York State through its "Pilot Program for Assessment and Implementation of Educational Telecommunications Applications as an Alternative to Strengthen Small Rural Schools," strives to "maintain the school as a focal point of community life ... by augmenting their strengths in order to overcome their weaknesses," similar techniques found to work and others being piloted can be undertaken in areas throughout the country by tackling the problems to find solutions cooperatively within communities and collaboratively over a broader scope.

Certainly, additional financial resources will be needed. But first, state and federal officials must comprehend the unique educational problems in rural schools created by terrain, occupation, poverty, and isolation and make special allowances for them. Yes, residents in rural areas have to be willing to invest in the future of their own children and through them, an investment in their communities.

Finally, components of rural school excellence are both tangible and intangible depending upon the circumstance, but schools' potential in rural America in promoting excellence, "... lies in their capacity to make students aware of the criteria for many forms of excellence, to show them 'exemplars' of such excellence, and to encourage them to imagine even higher levels of excellence. We cannot expect students to strive for something that they do not value and that those around them do not respect. But, they will not value and respect excellence if they cannot recognize it."[11]

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